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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years there have been numerous studies and frequent warnings about violent television programs and movies arousing young people to act violently. Researchers have pointed to many hours of viewing excessive violence as a potential contributor to violent behavior by youngsters. This digest examines evidence of violence in television programs, movies, and video games; the possible impact of audio-visual media violence on the behavior of youngsters; and what educators can do about it. Suggests six instructional activities for teaching about violence in the media. Describes five relevant Web sites. (BB)

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Violence in Audio-Visual Media: How Educators Can Respond

By Mary A. Hepburn

Over the past 20 years there have been numerous studies and frequent warnings about violent television programs and movies arousing young people to act violently. Of course, other social factors can increase the likelihood of violence by youth: lack of interaction with parents, brutality in home life, exposure to violence in neighborhoods, and easy access to guns. Nevertheless, researchers have pointed to many hours of viewing excessive violence as a potential contributor to violent behavior by youngsters. This Digest examines evidence of violence in TV programs, movies, and video games; its possible impact on the behavior of youngsters; and what educators can do about it.

TV Shows, Movies, and Video Games in American Households. Nearly 100 percent of households have television, and the total number of sets is increasing; 87 percent of households have two or more television sets. Over 60 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds have a television set in their bedroom. Cable TV is found in about 77 percent of American homes, greatly increasing the number of channels and programs available (Stanger and Gridina 1999). Children readily learn the TV-viewing lifestyle from the adults around them. Within households viewing time may total up to 59 hours a week (Nielsen 1998). In addition to extensive viewing of programs and movies on television, children at home have access to other on-screen entertainment, including video games and the Internet. Stanger and Gridina (1999) found that 67 percent of homes with children had video game equipment. Slightly over 68 percent of homes with children have computers and 41 percent have access to the internet. Boys are more than twice as likely than girls to play video games and are more likely than girls to use the Internet. While Internet use is increasing widely throughout society, television is still the main source of entertainment and news for the majority of Americans.

The Extent of Violence in Television Programs. Recent studies indicate extensive violence in television programs. The National Television Violence Study, for example, found that 57 percent of programs contained violence, usually numerous acts of violence in a single program. In approximately 75 percent of these programs, the violence seemed to be sanctioned, with no punishment of the perpetrators. Violence was depicted as humorous in more than a third of the programs. Only 4 percent of the violent programs offered a strong anti-violence message. Premium cable programs, often showing movies, had the highest percentage of violence. A study of children's programs showed that they were 10 percent more violent than adult programs (Seawell 1998).

For over three years, the UCLA Center for Communications Policy (1997) conducted studies monitoring violent content of TV programs and other home media. The UCLA studies point to specific programs and video games in which persistent acts of violence are portrayed, including *The X-Files*, the "Duke Nukem 3D" video game, and the kind of "sinister combat violence" found in Saturday morning programs for children.

There has been some improvement in recent years, especially in the television networks. But youngsters are still seeing and hearing a great deal of violent behavior during their usual viewing hours, and there is evidence that increasingly they are watching programs during later hours and seeing more graphic shows that combine sex and brutality (Seawell 1998).

Effects of Viewing Violence. Attraction to violent action is a cumulative effect of many hours and years of viewing violence on television and in movies by young people who have not developed critical resistance. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age 18 the average adolescent will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. Researchers observed that while a young viewer might see three to five violent acts in an hour of prime-time television viewing, Saturday morning cartoons contain 20 to 25 violent acts per hour. Pediatricians warn that media violence can be especially damaging to children under age 8 because they cannot readily tell the difference between real life and fantasy (Hepburn 2000).

Analysis of research reveals that while viewing violence can have serious long-term effects, making some young people comfortable with physical aggression and even arousing them to violent action, it can make others increasingly fearful of being victims. The negative influences are related to (a) frequent viewing of excessive violence in movies, TV programs, cartoons, and video games; (b) lack of interaction with family members or peers who provide mediating influences; and (c) the need for critical study of the media in education (Hepburn 2000).

Instructional Responses. What can educators do in response to the adverse effects of violence in audio-visual media on children and adolescents? Staying informed about research on the topic is an obvious first step. Until recently, such research has been difficult for educators to obtain. Textbooks and training programs used in the education of social studies teachers are just beginning to include mass media literacy studies and the skills needed to build a critical defense against the effects of violence in the entertainment that is so pervasive in the lives of American children. Pioneering curriculum and instruction are needed to bring media awareness and media literacy into courses for both teachers and students. Law-related education and citizenship/civic education programs are strong promoters of

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critical thinking. Therefore, lessons about media violence are well-suited to teacher training and classroom activities in these subjects. Because young people are already highly interested in TV viewing and video games, teachers readily can lead students into structured evaluation and critical thinking.

Six types of instructional activities, including appropriate questions and resources, are recommended for teaching about violence in the media.

1. Review the First Amendment rights of freedom of expression and discuss laws that limit broadcasts during specific hours and that regulate distribution of video games in order to protect children.
2. Examine the rationale for the television program rating system, the V-Chip in new TV sets, and the feasibility of parental review and application of V-Chip technology.
3. Use the research cited in this Digest as a starting point for student groups to systematically and critically evaluate their own home viewing of TV programs, movies, and video games.
4. Provide consumer education for home media consumption.
5. Conduct discussions and surveys involving the community to highlight the problem of violence in mass media and to generate practical solutions to the problem.

World Wide Web Resources. The following Web sites are recommended as valuable sources of information for teachers, students, and parents:

- The American Bar Association Division for Public Education publishes *Update on Law-Related Education*; issue 22 (2) 1998 of that publication contains viewpoints on free expression and regulation, updates on legislation and court decisions relating to the media, and several practical teaching strategies on media and communications issues. <www.abanet.org/publiced>
- The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania publishes studies on media, information, and society. The fourth annual survey (1999) of parents and children, entitled *Media in the Home*, is available on their Web site. <www.appcpenn.org>
- The Center for Media Literacy is a nonprofit organization that develops educational programs and materials to encourage critical thinking about all types of mass media. A catalog of educational kits, books, and videos for teachers and parents is available online. One of their videos, *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media*, has been praised for its approach to violence reduction. They also have a study kit, "TV Alert: A Wake-Up Guide to Television Literacy." <www.medialit.org>
- KIDSNET is an online national resource center on broadcasts for children from preschool to high school. The Web site serves as an information center and clearinghouse for children's television, videos, and multimedia. To increase media literacy, KIDSNET offers online guides to link reading with viewing of quality TV programs. <www.kidsnet.org>
- The National Institute on Media and the Family provides online resources on research, information, and education on the impact of the media on children and families. Included is the "1999 Video and Computer Game Report" and numerous resources of value to teachers and parents for evaluating media and educating children. Contact the organization toll free at 888/672-5437 or visit their Web site: <www.mediaandthefamily.org>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Services (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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